

ARTICLE



## Understanding the world through the affordances of drama: early career teacher perspectives

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### ABSTRACT

This article contemplates the way five early career drama teachers in NSW speak and write about what they consider, the special characteristics and attributions of drama to facilitate learning in order for students to make sense of a complex world. These particular teachers reflect on their passionate individual beliefs in the affordances of drama to provision students with tools to mediate a changing world and that teaching drama permits them to create the conditions for students to challenge popular or dominant notions. These drama teachers believe that good drama teaching also allows meaningful learning to occur for students from a range of abilities including, physical ability. These teachers unanimously argue that teaching drama has corroborated their ideological positions and cemented their belief that drama is a critical tool for transforming learning in ways that promotes student voice and agency.

### KEYWORDS

Drama teachers; early career; affordances; agency

## Introduction

The American educator Parker J. Palmer argued in his popular 'The Courage To Teach' (Palmer 2007), that teachers are *called* by a subject and relevant discipline. If Parker's argument is a truism, the following discussion about drama teachers in their career infancy bears out his beliefs. Drama teachers according to research (Grove O'Grady 2016) articulate personal epistemologies and ideological propensities when given the opportunity through discussion and writing that influence the way they teach, the content they teach and their attitudes to inclusion and equity. When these early career drama teachers write and talk about their teaching they want to maintain what they describe as the integrity of drama to mitigate against the uncertainty of the future, by transforming the curriculum to allow students the freedom and flexibility to explore controversial issues. Insights into what some drama teachers believe is critical in their teaching allows an understanding of the influence of teachers' ideological views and positions about teaching and learning that has consequences for good practices in drama teaching. These drama teachers' personal epistemologies influenced the way they taught and continue to teach drama, and their belief in the inherent values in drama for their students to 'know the world' (Grove O'Grady 2016).

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One overarching tenet of drama is that it 'does good' and these early career teachers argue very strongly that this is their experience in teaching drama, acknowledging at the same time that their early career status prevents them from commenting about the long term benefits. Gjaerum (2013) argues by legitimising the inherencies of the pedagogy, drama (or in his case, theatre) that it 'could and should educate'... 'that the theatre was a necessary part of a healthy, liberal society'. (Gjaerum 2013, 353).

Additionally, ideas that are currently prevalent and powerful in the research, theory and practice of drama are about the affordances of drama; the creativity agenda and a future focused approach to the challenges of post normality (Sardar 2010). A brief history of drama education in NSW demonstrates that drama is held in particular esteem by drama teachers, given its history of testing new ideas and breaking new ground in transforming the way students learn in the classroom. Drama teachers enter this field with a preconception about what it means to be a drama teacher and the way they might facilitate drama in their classrooms.

Practitioners in the field have been strong advocates for the assiduity of drama pedagogy in offering students a 'new basic', as critical to the curriculum, as numeracy and literacy (Anderson 2002). Neelands (2004) argues this history strongly informs the contemporary research and practice of drama in the twenty first century and the effects of this history on teaching practice. Others agree that strong historical ties to philosophies of critical pedagogy (Finneran and Freebody 2016) have shaped the way practitioners and researchers in drama curriculum understand the purpose and benefits of the subject. The ways of thinking about the subject have been deeply influenced by seminal education and/or drama theorists and practitioners in the community that include, Boal (1995), Bolton (1984), Freire (2000), Heathcote (2009), O'Neill (1995) and O'Toole (2002). The capacity of drama to teach students about the world that lies beyond their classrooms is considered a driving force in drama teaching and strongly influences the reasons why early career teachers feel so passionately about *their* subject.

Research has also explored the role of the arts both locally and internationally and where drama resides within that spectrum. Ewing's (2010) meta-analysis into the role of arts in the Australian curriculum, demonstrated that the arts and drama were imperative in the provision of opportunities for students and their teachers to understand what it actually means to be human and to be actively engaged in the world around them (1). In the American context, the *Critical Links: Learning in the Arts and Student Academic Achievement* (Deasy 2002) report found that access to the arts and art making was a fundamental right of children and an arts rich curriculum was relevant in order for students to remain engaged, critical thinkers. These larger discourses are influential in the way early career drama teachers might advocate for their subject and its inherencies.

This paper reports on a small study that examined the teaching philosophies and views of recent graduate teachers in drama to garner their views about the affect of teaching drama and drama skills to enculturate students with individual agency as part of a socially just practice. Given many scholars in the field consider the work of drama to be essentially positive (e.g., O'Connor 2009), O'Toole (1998) posits that drama can be equally disempowering if the teacher's views are discordant or conflicting with those held by students, for example.

## Background

This research is, in part, concerned with how five early career drama teachers conceptualise drama as a subject that lends itself to principles of equity and diversity. They reflect on and identify the key tenets in drama education – philosophically, empirically, practically or historically – allowing for some insights into the work of drama teachers. Consequential research (Ewing 2011) also explores and confirms why drama teachers might think that their subject is more useful to their students as a way to understand their worlds, as compared with other subjects they might be enrolled in at school.

The drama curriculum these early career teachers refer to in their teaching is prescribed by the NSW Board of Studies (now known as NESA) initially developed in 2003. The syllabus describes drama as, 'an art form with a discreet body of knowledge...a cooperative approach to exploring the world through enactment' (NSW Board of Studies 2000, 8). The way drama pedagogy is approached in the curriculum and articulated in the syllabus focuses on the process that the students undertake when they engage with the conventions of drama to explore issues (Freebody 2010). Drama as a concept more broadly has multiple interpretations and can include drama, theatre, acting, make believing, theatre in education, process drama and the burgeoning area of research that is applied theatre (Anderson and O'Connor 2015). This specific group of teachers denote syllabus driven drama when they use the term – drama. Drama has been a contested aspect of curriculum for over half a century (Hornbrook 1998) and some would argue (O'Toole 2002) for example, that despite its inclusion in the curriculum, recognising that drama provides a skill set or tools that can stand alone or complement other disciplines, is still untapped by many in the educational sphere at a bureaucratic level.

In order to understand why early career teachers might be vocal and in some cases activist in their advocacy of drama, it was interesting to recruit pre service teachers in their final year of study and to follow them into their first year of teaching. In order to really drill down into what their views were and to amplify their voices, a small group of interested students were recruited and as part of the study.

The early career teachers who participated in this research include:

- Nick – a teacher who had begun teaching in a low fee paying Christian school in Western Sydney who had previously taught in English in Vietnam.
- Elena – a teacher who was employed in an after school program using site-specific theatre techniques. She is active in the Fringe theatre scene in Sydney and is casual teaching in inner city schools in Sydney.
- David – a teacher who is employed as a permanent English and Drama teacher at a comprehensive girls' school in Northern Sydney. David is a passionate advocate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.
- Georgia – a teacher employed in a year-long contract to teach English and History in a low SES comprehensive high school in South Western Sydney. She is not employed to teach Drama however she instigated and established a drama club at the school.
- Jane – a teacher who was initially employed pending an occupational health and safety assessment of her suitability to work and teach in a high school because of her visual impairment. She has since been given permanent status in her position at a comprehensive high school in Sydney's North-Western suburbs.

Each participant contributed a free form teaching philosophy where they were invited to write about their passions and proclivities, for teaching drama in nuanced and highly individual ways. One of the driving factors in reading and analysing these teachers' philosophies was to acknowledge and understand their unique perspectives but also to build on a narrative form that is frequently used in undergraduate coursework to great effect. These then pre service teachers wrote about their attitudes and ideals about teaching students and teaching drama. Methodologically and theoretically understanding the way themes and ideas are reflected in narratives and conversation were significant and deeply enlightening. The methodological approach of this particular study was to analyse patterns of language with consideration and account taken of the social and cultural contexts in which the language is used.

The teachers in this study had firm views about the capacity for drama to engage students not only in curriculum specific thinking but also to affect change and to influence the learning and experiences of students at school. The following examples provide snapshots into their estimations about drama.

### **Drama can facilitate ways to understand the world beyond the classroom**

One of the current discourses privileged by the drama community is grounded in the idea that drama has a unique capacity to teach about the world and its embodied nature (Kemp 2012). Given the uncertainty of the future, there is perhaps more than ever a need to embrace this pedagogy and teach it to our students who will have to navigate uncertain futures (Anderson 2014).

The teachers in this study talked at length about their personal resolve to teach drama pedagogy in a way that facilitates a students' ability to develop the necessary tools to confidently navigate the world without the restrictions of complying rigidly to prescribed ideas.

Jane gives this example;

"Teaching Drama you see students developing skills beyond the curriculum such as confidence, charisma, teamwork and creativity...Drama links naturally with English and gives students a connection to other contexts through texts, providing a deeper knowledge and insight into themselves and their world" (Jane, TP. Lines 21-23).

Despite their limited teaching experience the teachers talk about drama providing their students with tools or skills that empower them to navigate a changing world in ways that other subjects do not, because of the way the content or the delivery might be structured. Jane's view is that drama connects students and gives them links to discipline thinking which in turn broadens the way they look at the world. The current work around interdisciplinarity (Repko, Szostak, and Buchberger 2016) and its importance for students in tying subject knowledge together would strongly corroborate her personal view. The teachers all agreed that drama provides a unique skill-set that empowers students to confront and to navigate societal and governance power structures that might preclude them from experiencing the world in its entirety.

Georgia also talks about drama differentiating itself as a subject because students have a freedom to express themselves and they can *be* themselves – without fear of reprisal because the rules and the structures allow for this differentiation.

“I suppose drama is an outlet for me as a teacher and I also know it’s an outlet for kids to express themselves, and I feel that sometimes in other subject area they aren’t able to do that.” (Georgia, Int. 1, Turn 6)

Georgia’s view is that she needs ways to express herself creatively to nourish and sustain her teaching. She reflects on this as a collaboration between herself and her students rather than two distinct conversations. In a similar vein Elena, having experienced a year in the classroom believes drama is needed on wider scale in schools. Her first teaching experience was a rural placement where she experienced a great deal of racism and her views about teaching are deeply influenced by this experience. By engaging with drama, she thinks students learn social and emotional intelligences that are critical for functioning as part of a community outside the classroom. She says:

“It has opened my eyes to the need for drama on a larger scale rather than just in the school setting. The experience that as a drama teacher I could influence kids through a lot of the drama and through performance, for all the things it does like building confidence, exploring your own creativity and problem solving and teamwork and all those sorts of things you really need to know.” (Elena, Int. 1, Turn 12)

The teachers, in particular Elena and Georgia believe that to fulfil their potential not only as learners, but also as responders to the social world, students need drama and the skills it provides. All five teachers spoke at some point in either their teaching philosophy or during an interview about what they felt were the unique properties of drama to mitigate racism or ableism, for example. At different times some of the teachers spoke about the relationship between drama and English, highlighting the synergy between the subjects and the importance of inter disciplinary thinking. However, they still felt drama was distinctly different because it offers students and teachers a different way to discuss world views and issues that other subjects might shy away from because they don’t fit in with the curriculum or they are too complex and controversial. Drama can, according to them offer students a more agentic way to tackle these issues, in a safe space.

“I don’t want to say traditional for English or any other class, that’s a really bad word, sorry, I don’t want to use that word, but I think in one way you’re in a seat just writing stuff down. I don’t know, I think that would be a little bit more confronting for like say a subject with that, but I feel like in drama you can, yeah, that sort of expectation that a student is, I don’t know, not allowed to explore these heavy things.” (David, Int. 2, Turn 52).

The teachers explained why they felt drama empowered their students to mediate their experiences in the world and as a result relate to people in more socially acceptable ways including the way they spoke to each other and treated each other in other subject areas. Their argument extends to believing that a drama classroom can also precipitate functioning in the world as an active citizen and attending to social mores with greater understanding of why these mores might exist in the first place. They made similar observations;

"And now, because I'm using drama they know how to treat each other which they didn't have in science and in other classrooms I've seen them in." (Georgia, Int. 2, Turn 23)

And;

"I believe in using drama to assist students in their understanding of power and human interactions and how to be in the world." (David, T.P., Line 29)

As a teacher, David sees his role as a facilitator of information and experience rather than a deliverer of content knowledge and this certainly accords with conceptualisations of teachers and their role in this decade. He believes students should discover for themselves what they *need* to know rather than having knowledge prescribed for them. He says that students require the ways and means to understand what it is to be fully functional as human beings in the world and that this journey of discovery can't be rushed or dictated as it is profoundly personal. Neelands' (2004) argued that it is not the pedagogy itself that is powerful, it is the human agency that propels the pedagogy to be powerful. This means that students need to learn about the world that is outside of the specificity of curriculum – they need to know where the power lies to mediate the world and be actively engaged in it. Drama and drama praxis these teachers are convinced, is essential to guide students' learning about the world.

"Imaginative experiences are created in the Drama classroom, you need a strong commitment to guiding students' understanding of themselves and the world within and beyond the classroom." (David, T.P., Lines 5-7)

David described a lesson he developed in drama where his students are learning about the Italian Commedia style of drama that is typically stylistic and one-dimensional. The students decided to develop a scene using this dramatic form as the impetus and to appropriate the work into a modern style of the reality program, 'The Bachelor'. During the program, prospective women and/or men are paraded before a suitable bachelor or bachelorette (in this case a bachelor) and the bachelor then makes his choice of partner based on the woman's physical attractiveness and ability to please him. Women are commodified and valued in the program based on their ability to be compliant and physically attractive and most contestants are generally Caucasian. On balance the program is riven with sexism and does not resile from this premise in its programming. He says this about the lesson;

"This group has decided to do a spin-off of, 'The Bachelor' and they've included... I mean I'm happy to let them do it, they've included all this sexual innuendo which comes from the Commedia style, which is crude and vulgar and infused that. They want to highlight the sexism of the program. Now are they going too far? I think it's fantastic that they break those boundaries." (David, Int. 2, Turn 53)

David believes that drama provides both teachers and students with opportunities to discuss the way popular culture can shape the way students experience and see the world. The program that his students decided to parody had no representations or diversity of culture or race, as his class had and the way the women were encouraged to behave, contraindicated the messages his class were receiving at school and in the community about the role of women and what they could achieve academically. Drama in this case, he said provided a forum to examine ideas and to speak freely about what messages might be

subliminally transferred in a television program that was widely viewed. He also reflected on the differences between the learning conditions in other school subjects compared with the learning conditions in his particular drama classroom. Students were able to challenge boundaries and test ideas and social mores in his classes, because of the physical drama space and the metaphorical space provisioned by drama and the syllabus. The conditions in their drama space, provided the freedom to evoke discussions of complex or controversial issues that might be confronting for everyone, including the teacher. He reflected;

"I feel that in drama the expectation is that a student can explore these things, many heavy things. With *Boal* for example, you can explore so many horrible things, things about oppression and things that are really painful. And that's fine, as long as the students realise that in drama it's drama and sometimes we need to do these sorts of things." (David, Int. 2, Turn 53)

### **Drama is an inclusive pedagogy**

Similarly, when Jane talks about drama as a tool for mediating the world she refers to a seminal moment in her classroom practice that has influenced the way she conceptualises drama. As a teacher who happens to be visually impaired, she accepts that her experiences at school and university strongly influence what she believes about drama in preparing students to participate in the wider world, no matter what their physical or intellectual ability. She admits her views are predicated on her own sometimes negative, schooling experiences.

"This stems from my own experiences at school. Inevitably teachers will impose their views and judgments on their students. Unfortunately some of these views are particularly detrimental, particularly to adolescents trying to assert themselves as capable and valued citizens in society." (Jane, T.P, Lines 6-8)

She then shared a powerful anecdote about the way drama can be used to empower students. She described a casual class she took in the IM (intellectual impairment) department. She was highly critical about the fact the regular teacher had left no set work for the class, which in her view undervalued their capabilities and their right to learn. Because there was no set work left for the students to do, her instinct was to recruit drama pedagogy as a highly accessible and inclusive way to teach a class with particular needs.

"I think drama skills, for me are what it can bring out in the students, no matter who they are." (Jane, Int. 1, Turn 31)

She reflected deeply in her teaching philosophy about her belief in drama to give students agency to express themselves to the best of their abilities, no matter what those abilities might be. She thought that ultimately, it was the physical dimension of drama that gave this group of students a way to express and articulate themselves when they were not able to do so through literate means.

"It allows students to develop their own opinions and their expressions to explore the world whatever their level or ability." (Jane, Int. 1, Turn 31)

The ephemeral quality of the word ‘expression’ suggests that Jane believes something transformative can occur when a student is able to engage with the content and ideas in a drama classroom and then use that skill to live in the world as a fulfilled human being. Similarly to David, Jane says she is a teacher who places student voice as a priority in her teaching and allows students time to actually think about issues for themselves, even if it is uncomfortable or confronting. Both teachers imply that part of the special work that drama does, is allow students to have a voice of their own and make their own meaning, rather than the prescriptive approach of other disciplines. Jane thinks students can develop their own ideas in a democratic and negotiated way, such as in the example of the class who were able to develop performance pieces using just their bodies, given many of the students had limited speech. As she talked about the class she paused to search for the right word and in doing so catches her breath when she remembers the heightened emotion of the moment.

“Just ...these kids who, some of them were almost illiterate in reading and writing were creating the most ...they were creating cars, bicycles with their bodies.” (Jane, Int. 1, Turn 31)

The meaning in this example Jane gives is complex as she searched for the right word to describe the effect of this moment in her teaching. She recognises that these students have a different capacity for doing the work in drama, but because the pedagogy also allows for physical and differentiated work, the students are able to work using their bodies. ‘Just...these kids’. She can’t believe the students are able to execute such complex ideas in a physical way. This sentence in many ways affirms Jane’s belief in drama, that all students, whatever their limitations can access drama pedagogy and derive something meaningful. Access to pedagogy and deep learning she believes, should not be limited to students with high literacy or intellectual function. Drama can offer students ways into engaging with the world on different levels and for different purposes, as Jane has described, ‘just with their bodies’. Jane says she is always concerned with student access and motivated by giving these opportunities;

“It’s that drama, just giving people the confidence or the skills to address themselves who might normally be a shy student because they’ve tried being a character or using their body or sound or whatever that might be if they don’t have those tools. Drama gives them those tools, I think. Team-work, for one thing.” (Jane, Int. 1, Turn 31)

Jane thinks drama is an opportunity to find time for students to think and perform differently, to test divergent ways of being, particularly physical ways to know and be in the world. As a teacher with personal physical challenges she is acutely aware of the need to meet these challenges when faced with the world and she wants her students to be empowered to learn in this way too.

### The way forward

Drama is powerful rhetoric (Neelands 2004) and of itself, it cannot teach about the world. It is the engagement with the content, the way it is structured and planned and transacted that gives the pedagogy the requisite power. These early career teachers were firm in their commitment to the breadth of pedagogical opportunities within the drama curriculum for teaching students ways to be meaningfully engaged with the



world. The implications for further research include understanding how the central tenets and intent of drama can translate or manifest in other disciplines and promote true interdisciplinary thinking. Drama teachers, while speaking, acting and valuing particular pedagogy and practices cannot claim to be the only teachers with ideological preponderances and commitment to their students knowing about the world (Sutherland, Howard, and Markauskaite 2010). The inclusion of teaching philosophies as narratives that explain ideological commitment provides a unique insight into the way teachers conduct their work in the classroom and provides a rich seam of data and insight into early career drama teachers' views and beliefs.

These early career drama teachers believe drama is a subject with its own distinctive traditions allowing for a unique provisioning of teaching and learning possibilities and method for teaching complex and wordly issues, to help students understand prejudices, for example.

Other potentially interesting areas for research emerged from this work and these include hypothesising the effect of teacher ideological alignment to social justice in teaching practices and explicating and defining the influences that shape a student's capacity to be a global citizen in preparation for an uncertain future and economy. Can this be measured simply by being aware of the democratic processes, or is it likely to be best tested by the competency with which students can resist/understand dominant and neoliberal discourses in the world? These and other questions remain untested thus far.

Understanding and measuring the capacity of drama as a subject to prepare students in critical and creative ways for an uncertain future (Sardar 2010) would provide policy makers, teachers and theorists with a unique insight into practices in real time in the classroom. This has the potential to be both powerful and disruptive to curriculum and the status quo. Not only do these insights build an understanding of the way teachers construct, view and assimilate drama, but it also provides an awareness of the different kinds of facilitation that is possible in classrooms, and the way teachers of drama and other disciplines, can engage in discussions about the future.

'We cannot see what is "out there" merely by looking around. Everything depends on the lenses through which we view the world' (Palmer 2007, 27).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Dr. Alison Louise Grove O'Grady* is the Program Director (combined degrees) and Lecturer at the University of Sydney, Sydney School of Education and Social Work. Her research focuses on the role of empathy (Stein 1964) in creative pedagogy and its relationship to education and teacher professional learning; and the facilitation of historical knowledge using dramatic interactions to bridge different social and cultural contexts. Alison's work explores the tensions regarding the areas of empathy, access and equity facilitated through creative practices and pedagogies. She also researches in interdisciplinary spaces particularly in ways that creative pedagogies and theatre making can support and generate transformation in schools and other contexts.

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